The Historical Journal, 43, 3 (2000), pp. 699–728 Printed in the United Kingdom

DISRAELI AND ENGLAND*

J. P. PARRY
Pembroke College, Cambridge

ABSTRACT. *This article questions the dominant historiographical approaches to understanding the career of Benjamin Disraeli, which view him either as more opportunistic than most of his political contemporaries or as more 'continental' in his outlook. It emphasizes his determination to understand English history and values, and argues that a desire to defend and realize his conception of England gave his career coherence. He saw himself as a foe of dangerous cosmopolitan ideas that were damaging the national character and creating social disharmony. This allowed him to cast all his major political initiatives in a heroic, elitist yet restorative light. He conceived those initiatives as a response to the damage inflicted by the domestic and international crises of the 1830s and 1840s. Indeed it is arguable that as a result Disraeli's political strategy in later life was in some ways both quixotic and outdated.*

In the late 1870s there was unprecedented organizational activity in both political parties. Assisted by the intense debates on the Eastern question, Liberals and Conservatives attempted to reach out to working-class electors and integrate them within the party system.[1] Of great help to Liberal activists was the reinvention of Gladstone as 'the People's William', to which he willingly contributed. Parties of working men came to his estate at Hawarden to hear him address them and to watch him cut down trees; they were allowed to take away the chips, which proudly adorned many a humble mantlepiece.[2] He also received gifts from supporters, such as a silver axe.

The Liberal manufacture of a cult of Gladstone has been well charted by historians.[3] Less discussed has been the attempt in response to fashion one for Disraeli. In August 1878, a Conservative poet and artist, Tracy Turnerelli, struck by Gladstone's receipt of the axe, planned a popular demonstration to

* This article is an offshoot of work done by me in order to write the article 'Benjamin Disraeli' for the *New dictionary of national biography* (Oxford, forthcoming). The full entry is substantially longer and broader in scope. I am very grateful to the late Professor Colin Matthew for the original commission to write the entry and to him and Robert Faber of Oxford University Press for permission to publish this article as a by-product with a different perspective. Many thanks also to Dr Boyd Hilton and Dr Max Jones for helpful comments on a draft. All works cited below are by Disraeli unless stated otherwise.

[1] See J. Garrard, 'Parties, members and voters after 1867', in T. Gourvish and A. O'Day, eds., *Later Victorian Britain, 1867–1900* (Basingstoke, 1988), pp. 127–50.

[2] D. A. Hamer, 'Gladstone: the making of a political myth', *Victorian Studies*, 22 (1978–9), pp. 36–7.

[3] Ibid.; E. Biagini, *Liberty, retrenchment, and reform: popular Liberalism in the age of Gladstone, 1860–1880* (Cambridge, 1992), ch. 7.

honour Disraeli's diplomatic triumphs at the Congress of Berlin. He proposed a People's Tribute, a Roman wreath in 22-carat gold paid for by the pennies of working-class Conservatives. Each leaf of the wreath would cost £5, and thus need the support of 1,200 working men. Every town contributing a portion of a leaf would have its name inscribed on the back. Over the autumn and winter, the idea caught the imagination of the Conservative associations: 52,800 men from 115 towns eventually contributed. Disraeli was to be crowned with the wreath at a grand party event at the Crystal Palace, when a thousand children would sing a tributary poem. The finished creation was on display there for a month in 1879. The prince of Wales inspected and admired it; Joseph Chamberlain called it 'a sham tribute to a sham patriot'.[4]

This particular story is worth recovering because, though a *cause célèbre* at the time, it features in none of the many biographies of Disraeli – and because we shall return to it later. However, there was nothing unusual in the attempt to project Disraeli as a popular figure of high principle. In the 1870s and 1880s, both he and Gladstone were depicted on mass-produced busts, ashtrays, and dishcloths. In particular, Disraeli was repackaged as a tory democrat after his death in 1881; it suited the Conservatives of the 1880s and 1890s to emphasize his interest in social and imperial questions and his apparent rapport with the working man.[5]

Twentieth-century professional historians have demolished the pious partisan idealism with which Gladstone and Disraeli were regarded by their late Victorian supporters, and replaced it with a sophisticated scepticism. Much effort and discrimination have been applied to assessing Gladstone's complex motivation. But on the whole, even those historians who are most willing to emphasize his deviousness and hunger for power also rightly attach importance to tracing the impact of his intellectual outlook on his initiatives. Disraeli has been much less kindly treated. In reaction against the tory democrat approach, he is generally regarded as a cynical opportunist. Historians seem to feel obliged to place a sly construction on all his operations, for fear of being branded naive. Those few scholars who have attempted to propose for him a guiding set of principles have tended to focus on exotic 'continental' themes, distant from the central concerns of his contemporaries. The purpose of this article is to suggest that all three dominant historiographical views of Disraeli – the tory democrat, unprincipled, and continental perspectives – are problematical. Instead it argues that his political outlook and behaviour were given coherence by his intense consciousness of England's history and character, which drove him to define his political career in terms of a heroic defence of national values, traditions, and power. Though Disraeli's personal vision of England was in some respects unusual, his underlying concerns were

[4] E. T. Turnerelli, *Memories of a life of toil: the autobiography of Tracy Turnerelli, 'the old Conservative'* (London, 1884), pp. 184–231.

[5] On this repackaging, see M. Pugh, *The tories and the people, 1880–1935* (Oxford, 1985), ch. 1, and P. Smith, *Disraeli: a brief life* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 213–15.

not so far removed from those of other politicians of his generation – the generation that came to maturity in the 1830s and 1840s. Like Gladstone and the whig and Peelite leaders of that time, he was concerned with threats to established political, social, and religious values, and with the conditions on which elite rule could be reasserted. He fitted squarely into a mid-nineteenth-century British political order that was engaged on a quest for national leadership in response to radicalism, uncertainty, and materialism.

I

The first of the three historiographical approaches to Disraeli, the tory democrat argument, was severely damaged in the 1960s. Historians showed that Disraeli had few proposals for social legislation in 1874–80, and that the 1867 Reform Act had been shaped by parliamentary tactics much more than by any visions of the Conservatism of the unenfranchised working man.[6] However, the tory democratic view has survived in some quarters in a more subtle form: that Disraeli had a cunning insight into the popular psychology and presented his policy after 1867 – especially his social, foreign, and imperial policy – so as to maximize an electoral appeal to the working classes.[7]

To some extent, this is uncontroversial. A politician who did not think about the attractiveness of his policies would be peculiar and unsuccessful. Disraeli was certainly capable of striking chords with what he considered to be popular views. However, it will be argued below that his understanding was often outdated and politically ineffective. More to the point, he deliberately opposed popular clamour on more occasions than he encouraged it.[8] It misinterprets Disraeli to see him as engaged on a cynical search for popularity. Instead, he was both old-fashioned and elitist in his conception of how politics operated. That he was old-fashioned is perhaps no longer very contentious. His electoral world was that of genteel Buckinghamshire. He fought only two contested elections after 1841, neither of them at all difficult. During the election

[6] P. Smith, *Disraelian Conservatism and social reform* (London, 1967); M. Cowling, *1867: Disraeli, Gladstone and revolution: the passing of the second Reform Bill* (Cambridge, 1967).

[7] For the view that social reform was 'aimed explicitly at the urban and industrial working classes', see R. W. Davis, *Disraeli* (London, 1976), p. 173, supported by J. T. Ward, 'Derby and Disraeli', in D. Southgate, ed., *The Conservative leadership, 1832–1932* (London, 1974), pp. 92, 100. For the view that imperialism was adopted for similar reasons, see especially F. Harcourt, 'Disraeli's imperialism, 1866–1868: a question of timing', *Historical Journal*, 23 (1980), pp. 87–109, and e.g. D. Southgate, 'Imperial Britain', in C. J. Bartlett, ed., *Britain pre-eminent: studies of British world influence in the nineteenth century* (London, 1969), p. 162.

[8] E.g. in criticizing the extra-parliamentary agitation for the return of Protection in 1849; in refusing to pander to the Bonapartist war scares of 1852–3 and 1859; in opposing the extension of the Crimean War in 1855–6; in attacking the anti-native hysteria in the British media generated by the Indian Mutiny of 1857; in refusing to meet Garibaldi on his visit of 1864. The best case on the other side is Disraeli's occasional leaning towards anti-Catholicism, but the extent of this can easily be exaggerated: see e.g. W. F. Monypenny and G. E. Buckle, *The life of Benjamin Disraeli earl of Beaconsfield* (6 vols., London, 1910–20), III, pp. 374, 399–401, 543–5.

campaigns of 1868, 1874, and 1880 he hardly ever spoke in public. There is no reason to think that Disraeli ever adjusted to the idea that elections could be won by national policy initiatives. He took very few steps to cultivate a popular political reputation.[9] But his elitism went further than that. From his youth, he was fascinated by the concept of genius (on which his father wrote),[10] and by the great men of history. He harboured a romantic craving for similar fame. His political novels are an extended discussion of the virtues of political leadership. He doubted whether in a country as aristocratic as England, there could ever be an effective radical movement that was not led by the elite: 'even treason to be successful must be patrician'.[11] In the 1830s and 1840s, he saw himself as a leader-in-waiting, an artist-prophet whose insights were needed in order to save the country from its foolish and humdrum opinions. Throughout his life, the frequent unwillingness of the English upper and middle classes to follow (or even understand) his analysis led him into a compensatory sense of intellectual superiority to them – a sense manifest in his ambiguous attitude towards his grand but bland fictional aristocratic characters.[12] It was psychologically necessary for him to pit himself against conventional opinion, especially of the powerful but insular middle classes, for whom he always retained what Derby considered an 'odd dislike'.[13] Disraeli saw himself as an educator, not a follower, of public opinion. As he wrote in *Coningsby*, and suggested more than once in later life, 'the Spirit of the Age is the very thing that a great man changes'.[14]

The second and most common historiographical approach, that Disraeli was an unprincipled opportunist, owes its modern vitality primarily to the influence of Robert Blake's shrewd, indeed worldly, biography of 1966, which stressed his subject's pragmatism as an antidote to the tory democrat view. He belittled Disraeli's ideas and celebrated his inconsistencies. More recent biographers

[9] As late as 1876, Bagehot wrote that 'ten miles from London … there is scarcely any real conception of him': N. St John-Stevas, ed., *The collected works of Walter Bagehot: III: the historical essays* (London, 1968), p. 504.

[10] See James Ogden, *Isaac D'Israeli* (Oxford, 1969), pp. 109–13.

[11] He therefore urged leniency towards Chartism: *Hansard's parliamentary debates. 3rd series* (*H*), LI, 729, 28 Jan. 1840. In *Sybil* (1845), Egremont says: 'the People can never be strong': bk IV, ch. 15.

[12] See e.g. the satire on aristocratic philistinism in the opening chapter of *Sybil*, and on the poverty of upper-class language and sympathies in *Lothair* (1870), chs. 28, 81. Lothair and Endymion are both very bland heroes.

[13] *A selection from the diaries of Edward Henry Stanley, 15th earl of Derby (1826–93) between September 1869 and March 1878*, ed. J. Vincent (London, 1994), pp. 416, 198. Disraeli criticized the 'movement of the middle classes for the abolition of slavery' as 'virtuous, but … not wise': in its ignorant self-righteousness, it had 'ruined the colonies and aggravated the slave trade': *Lord George Bentinck: a political biography* (London, 1852), p. 324.

[14] *Coningsby* (1844), bk 3, ch. 1. See his *Inaugural address delivered to the university of Glasgow* (2nd edn, including the occasional speeches, London, 1873), pp. 9–10, and *H*, CCLV, 107–8, 3 Aug. 1880. That is, the intellectual spirit of the age, as opposed to the social forces that could not be countered: for an example of his use of the phrase in the latter sense, see his 1852 election address, in Buckle, *Disraeli*, III, p. 369.

have gone further. One account, for example, sees him as 'entirely pragmatic' in his quest for power and finds it 'difficult to say what ideals he had'.[15] It is important to grasp, however, that this perception that Disraeli lacked principle originated as a sneer by his contemporary opponents, made for political purposes and compounded by snobbery and anti-Semitism.[16] The Peelites never forgave him for his use of the corn law issue to destroy Peel. In the 1850s and 1860s, high tories (like the future Lord Salisbury) could not perceive any principles underlying Disraeli's willingness to combine with some radicals to make initiatives on financial issues, India, and parliamentary reform.[17] The events of 1867 set this view in stone.

It is indeed true that intrigue fascinated him. It helps to explain his obsession with political life. It is a frequent subject of his fiction, and his first essay on ambition, *Vivian Grey* (1826), was used against him by canting liberal critics all his life. This fascination was *part* of Disraeli's relentless examination of the art of politics. He saw the highest form of that art as a synthesis of action and imagination, of intrigue and idealism.[18] As a consequence, he took great pleasure in exposing the humbug of opponents who disingenuously paraded their virtue – which has not helped his reputation in the modern liberal academy.[19] Yet naive high-minded criticism of this sort misses the point. Hardly any Victorian politician took more care than Disraeli to work out his ideas.[20] The historical figures whom he most admired were 'philosophical' statesmen like Metternich and Burke. Such men relished political intrigue but also had the imagination and insight to discern the great ideological struggles that lay beyond short-term plotting; they thwarted challenges to their values by a combination of powerfully uplifting arguments and deft tactics.[21] In the 1850s and 1860s, Disraeli, being in opposition, had to make parliamentary alliances with radical and Irish MPs, over parliamentary reform, India, finance, and the church, but it is crucial to understand that he sought to do so

[15] I. Machin, *Disraeli* (Harlow, 1995), pp. 5, 165. R. W. Davis argued that 'for him, politics was a perpetual jockeying for power and place, and little else': *Disraeli*, p. 222.

[16] For slurs by Graham and Herbert, see Lord Stanmore, *Sidney Herbert Lord Herbert of Lea: a memoir* (2 vols., London, 1906), II, pp. 173, 177, and Herbert's controversial remark about circumcision in the highly charged circumstances of *H*, CXXIII, 610, 26 Nov. 1852. For high tory anti-Semitism see Buckle, *Disraeli*, IV, p. 44.

[17] [Lord R. Cecil,] 'The budget and the Reform Bill', *Quarterly Review*, 107 (1860), pp. 544–50.

[18] *Tancred* (1847) includes lengthy discussions between Fakredeen and Tancred on these concepts. *The wondrous tale of Alroy* (1833) and *Lothair* also touch on them. *Bentinck*, ch. 1, contains interesting reflections on Lord John Russell as a literary man yet man of action.

[19] In Roy Jenkins's view, 'he does not inspire sustained admiration … It is almost true to say that the better he is known the less he is respected': review of J. Ridley, *The young Disraeli*, in *Daily Telegraph*, 11 Feb. 1995, p. 7.

[20] Even after his first political foray, he published *What is he?* (1833). In *H*, LXXXVI, 279, 8 May 1846, he maintained that he had arrived at his ideas by himself, rather than have 'hereditary opinions carved out' for him.

[21] On Metternich, see Disraeli to Metternich, 12 Oct. 1848, 3 Jan. 1849, M. G. Wiebe et al., eds., *Benjamin Disraeli letters: V: 1848–1851* (Toronto, 1993), pp. 93, 123. On Burke, see the heartfelt passage in *Sybil*, bk I, ch. 3.

in ways that would uphold, not betray, conservative ideals. This is suggested below, and historians' allegations of major inconsistency on his part are challenged.

In recent years a third historiographical approach has evolved, emphasizing Disraeli's intellectual cogency and the impact of certain ideas, especially continental ones, on his writings and speeches. That interest in his mental outlook is welcome, and this article seeks rather to develop its implications, and make new connections, than to attack it.[22] The tendency, particularly in Paul Smith's writings, has been to focus on Disraeli's early life and enthusiasms, and especially on foreign influences such as German philosophy, romanticism, and Judaism.[23] At one level, it is very helpful to see Disraeli as exotic. It suited him – as for different reasons it did many of his enemies – to suggest that his insights were unique and (to his critics) 'un-English'. But we should not forget that many Englishmen of his generation were as deeply affected as Disraeli was by German philosophy and romanticism. His Jewish heritage was undoubtedly important to him, but – as Smith recognizes – he used it primarily to make points about the values and needs of England (a country that, in his adult years, he hardly ever left). Discussion of the impact of his early 'continental' interests in shaping his personality is useful. But Disraeli's self-education was not just a matter of 'fashioning himself', as recent work suggests.[24] He reflected a great deal on the government of England and strove to contribute to the national debate about it. His consciousness of his racial apartness made him all the more determined a student of English character – which is very far from saying that he was an accurate one.[25]

This article suggests that Disraeli's political practice was an ambitious but coherent marriage of elitist insight, deft manoeuvre, and reflections on Englishness. (Disraeli nearly always talked of 'England', not 'Britain', and had strikingly little to say about Scotland or Wales.) He saw himself as a modern-day English Metternich or Burke, fighting what was essentially an

[22] J. Vincent, in *Disraeli* (Oxford, 1990), was one of the first recent writers to reflect suggestively on the importance of Disraeli's prose works for his politics, though in general keeping them separate. The most prominent of revisionists is Paul Smith: see especially his *Disraeli*, and C. Richmond and P. Smith, eds., *The self-fashioning of Disraeli, 1818–1851* (Cambridge, 1998). There is some interesting analysis of Disraeli's early novels in J. Ridley, *The young Disraeli* (London, 1995). A different tack has been pursued by some valuable recent articles which have taken the mature Disraeli seriously as a thoughtful policy-maker: P. Ghosh, 'Disraelian Conservatism: a financial approach', *English Historical Review*, 99 (1984), pp. 268–96; A. Warren, 'Disraeli, the Conservatives and the government of Ireland', *Parliamentary History*, 18 (1999), pp. 45–64 and 145–67, and A. Warren, 'Disraeli, the Conservatives and the national church', *Parliamentary History*, 19 (2000), pp. 96–117.

[23] See also A. Hawkins, *British party politics, 1852–1886* (Basingstoke, 1998), p. 213.

[24] See Richmond and Smith, *Self-fashioning*, and Smith, 'Disraeli's politics', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser., 37 (1987), p. 85, where he claims that the purpose of Disraeli's writings of the 1840s was psychological and 'not to supply a programme of political action'.

[25] The determination and inaccuracy were both highlighted by Frederick Greenwood in 'Beaconsfield', *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (11th edn, London, 1910), III, p. 570.

ideological war. In that war, he sought what one might call the realization of the national character.[26] Disraeli identified a set of historical values and traditions that made England unique, and set himself the task of articulating them, promoting them, and, in particular, seeing off attempts to undermine them. This was an ideological war rather than a social one: that is to say, Disraeli did not seek to arrest inevitable changes in underlying social conditions in England, such as the rise of Manchester and manufacturing.[27] His title to fame would be his genius in combating destructive *ideas*, cosmopolitan ideas that would rot the cohesion and greatness of the country. Most of those threats materialized in the late 1830s and 1840s, the years in which Disraeli came of age as a politician, and it is arguable that to the end of his career his preoccupations were shaped by the conceptions he developed then; in that sense, he spent his life looking backwards. But his politics were reactive and restorative rather than reactionary. He tackled specific challenges; he was a practical politician, not a visionary. At various times, the problems to be addressed were different, but the aim was always to re-establish an organic unity out of chaos, to build a synthesis out of conflict – to make England a nation again, to reunite her church, to resolve tensions in her great landed interest, to realize her national role in the world, to save her empire. Stimulated by his youthful dabbling in German philosophy, Disraeli perceived the political world in terms of clashes of values and the scope for a great man to reconcile them.[28] His was a profoundly conservative approach, but also a heroic and individualistic one. Disraeli aimed to pit his wits against the serried ranks of human foolishness, in order to reinvigorate for posterity the noblest of 'traditionary' English values.

II

Disraeli's ideas were the result 'of reading and of thought', principally in his father's library.[29] They owed a great deal to his father and to Burke,[30] and to the sense of English history that he imbibed in the process. He felt that the greatness of the English was attributable to their traditional values. 'Religion, property, and natural aristocracy' were also the leading Jewish values (thus legitimizing his claim to guide a landed English party).[31] Firm and inspiring leadership founded on these three ideals checked popular excesses: in a civilized society, men were led away from worshipping their own passions, to

[26] 'Nations have characters as well as individuals': *Vindication of the English constitution in a letter to a noble and learned lord* (London, 1835), p. 16. As Smith points out, 'Young England' could be seen as concerned with 'the liberation of the national genius': 'Disraeli's politics', p. 81.

[27] On this, see *Coningsby* (1844), bk IV, ch. 1.

[28] See Disraeli's *Revolutionary Epick* (1834, on Napoleon) and his speech on Ireland, *H*, LXXI, 437, 9 Aug. 1843.

[29] *H*, LXXXVI, 279, 8 May 1846.

[30] Disraeli's peerage title of Beaconsfield was the one that Burke had wanted. It is interesting that Disraeli seems to have had little concern about being known to posterity by an English rather than a Jewish name.

[31] *Coningsby*, bk IV, ch. 15; *Bentinck*, p. 497.

'adore and to obey' instead.[32] England's 'traditionary influences' included the ancient, decentralized political system; the rich set of values and interests associated with the land; and the church, 'the only Jewish institution that remains', the receptacle of the divine truths entrusted to the Semites, and the natural focus for man's deep spiritual sense. These traditions upheld and symbolized the national character, representing the 'realised experience of a nation'. This 'large realised capital of thought and sentiment' had given England a unique mixture of political freedom, social order, financial strength, and global power.[33] Only fidelity to creed had saved the English character from wallowing in the country's unparalleled wealth and luxury, leading to the dissolution 'of manners and of morals'.[34] The leaders of England were trustees of her heritage (and 'Young England' called on idealistic young noblemen to act as such). They must defend it against the threat from materialism and cosmopolitan ideas, which would lead to degeneration and conquest by fitter, hardier races – for, as Disraeli often said, 'all is race'.[35] Politicians must understand the temper and genius of the nation – by reading its history. Few politicians conceived of present-day problems more resolutely in terms of their relation to the past. Disraeli hardly ever made a major speech without invoking numerous historical precedents and parallels.

Disraeli saw the late 1830s and 1840s as a period of disintegration of those historic ideals and traditions. In 1847, he wrote that the English 'have ceased to be a nation'.[36] In various ways, all his writings and speeches of this decade touched on one or other facet of this process. Social cohesion was decaying; political leadership was failing; respect for religion and property was declining; materialism was in the ascendant. The many crises of the 1840s affected other politicians of conservative bent in the same way: hence the despairing cry of the young Gladstone, in 1843, 'when will anybody govern anything?'.[37]

Not all the traditional 'Saxon' characteristics of the English had been lost, but many were undoubtedly being degraded by a craven surrender to fashionable or muddled ideas that would undermine the nation's power.[38] Until the end of his life, Disraeli defined his task as being to rally the 'national' side in the great battle between 'national' and 'cosmopolitan' approaches to the government of England. He regularly set this out as the main conflict in politics.[39] By cosmopolitanism he meant various abstractions not rooted in

[32] *Coningsby*, bk IV, ch. 13.

[33] *Address at Glasgow*, pp. 15–16; Buckle, *Disraeli*, IV, pp. 350, 410.

[34] 1863: Buckle, *Disraeli*, IV, p. 372. [35] *Address at Glasgow*, p. 16; *Bentinck*, p. 331.

[36] *Tancred*, bk II, ch. 1. [37] R. Shannon, *Gladstone: I: 1809–1865* (London, 1982), p. 127.

[38] *Bentinck*, p. 331, lists among surviving 'Saxon' characteristics 'the love of toil, the love of money, the love of peace, the hatred of the Pope … the aversion to central justice'.

[39] E.g. at Edinburgh, 29 Oct. 1867, and at Crystal Palace, 24 June 1872, cited in T. E. Kebbel, ed., *Selected speeches of the late right honourable the earl of Beaconsfield* (2 vols., London, 1882), II, pp. 487–8, 524. In 1851 he described the struggle over the corn laws as merely an initial stage in the 'great contention' between the two principles on which 'the fate of this island as a powerful community depends': *Bentinck*, p. 583. In 1854 he announced that the Aberdeen coalition was divided between the school of 'British opinions' represented by Palmerston and Russell and the

English social realities. It is useful to classify these under two headings – constitutional and ideological.

Constitutionally, there were two major cosmopolitan threats to English political values: excessive centralization and the decline of the old two-party parliamentary system. He saw the territorial constitution – the power of land, local authorities, and the many other traditional interests of the country – as 'bulwarks of the multitude' against the 'centralizing system which has taken root in other countries'.[40] Hence his early attacks on the unhistorical utilitarianism of the 1830s, the government's centralizing experiments with the poor law and education, and its 'declar[ation of] war against Birmingham' by subsidising a police force there.[41] Historically, the English had possessed a 'noble system of self-government'.[42] The independence of local institutions was one crucial element in ensuring that 'society is more important than the state', but so too was parliament's freedom of action as against the executive. However, without strong parties, parliamentary government would be 'the weakest and the most corrupt government in the world'.[43] The independence and vigour of party was the best security for 'public liberty', as well as 'the integrity of public men'; it upheld the 'principle of private honour'.[44] Party was also an important way of 'realis[ing the] experience of an ancient society'; it ensured that politics were run by a 'disciplined array of traditional influences'.[45] Thus the assertion of party principle gave 'tone to the public mind'. It also prevented a popular parliament from 'degenerat[ing] into a mob'.[46] Disraeli came to be a doughty defender of the two-party system.

Yet that venerable combination of discipline, principle, and liberty fell into utter disarray in the 1840s. In *Coningsby* (1844) and *Sybil* (1845), written while he was a backbench critic of the current party leadership, Disraeli had charted the failures of Liverpool, Wellington, and Peel to govern on historic tory principles. This culminated in Peel's weak-minded concession to cosmopolitan ideas (and 'police surveillance' in Ireland), which he could only impose on his backbenchers by the 'intolerable yoke of official despotism'.[47] In Disraeli's eyes, Peel's unprincipled autocracy of 1841–6 was followed by Russell's minority whig government, which lacked the power to govern coherently. Later came the Aberdeen coalition of 1852–5, which was incapable of pursuing

---

'school of Russian politics' headed by Aberdeen, who should bear the blame for the descent into war: *H*, CXXXII, 298, 31 Mar. 1854.

[40] 'General preface', *Lothair* (1870), pp. ix–x; *H*, LXXXIII, 1346–7, 20 Feb. 1846.

[41] On the last, see *H*, XLIX, 694, 732, 23 Apr., 24 Apr. 1839.

[42] *Speeches*, II, p. 455, 30 Aug. 1848.

[43] *Times*, 18 June 1868, p. 9; *Bentinck*, p. 310.

[44] *H*, CLIV, 128, 7 June 1859; *Speeches*, I, p. 110, II, p. 492–3, 22 Jan. 1846, 3 Apr. 1872. These were Disraeli's mature views: in the early 1830s he had rejected both parties, seeing them as exclusive and incapable factions.

[45] *Speeches*, II, p. 455, 30 Aug. 1848.

[46] 'Coalition', 7 May 1853, in *Whigs and whiggism: political writings*, ed. W. Hutcheon (London, 1913), p. 435; Disraeli to the queen, 16 Mar. 1873, Buckle, *Disraeli*, V, p. 217.

[47] *Speeches*, I, pp. 97, 88, 11 Apr. 1845.

a principled and effective policy on any major subject – foreign policy (disastrously), parliamentary reform or Protestantism – because of its ideological differences. (In 1852, Disraeli had famously warned: 'England does not love coalitions.')[48] In August 1848, Disraeli made a celebrated lament for the collapsed two-party system, and the consequent decline of parliament from a body rooted in an understanding of the English character into a gaggle of selfish crotchets and ambitions.[49] This indicated a real disillusionment on his part with parliamentary government at this time, which is reflected in the negative portrayal of English politics in *Tancred*.

Like Gladstone, he was very conscious after 1846 of the importance of re-establishing a principled two-party model, in order to avoid weak, ineffective, and unhistorical government. For Disraeli, the function of the tory/Conservative party was to embody the 'national will and character' against ideological threats to English traditions.[50] The tory policy was national in two senses: it was rooted in history, but (except when badly conceived by blinkered leaders) it was also integrative rather than exclusive and sectional. Disraeli usually painted his Liberal opponents as anti-national in both senses, but in particular as infected with cosmopolitan confusion. (It should be noted in passing that some of Disraeli's heroes could also have been painted in this light had he chosen to do so, since his 'historic toryism' was a selective construct of congenial individual aspects of different creeds – mainly from Bolingbroke, Burke, and Pitt.) The eighteenth-century whigs had run an anti-national system of 'Venetian politics, Dutch finance, and French wars'.[51] Their nineteenth-century successors showed their fascination with abstractions by allying with a host of undesirable ideologues: utilitarians, Irish Repealers, opponents of the church establishment, and laissez-faire Cobdenite zealots. The whigs traditionally displayed unhealthy oligarchical tendencies; as time went on, they abandoned them for unhealthy foreign constitutional practices.[52] Thus the party political struggle could be glorified into a war for the soul of England. Disraeli romanticized the political game into a great conflict of ideas in order to justify his lifelong obsession with it, just as Gladstone rationalized it into a struggle against human sinfulness in order to justify a career spent in the Commons chamber rather than in the pulpit.

Disraeli took a stand against specific threats to English political values and, more generally, against the egalitarian ideas that affected the nineteenth century, such as 'cosmopolitan fraternity', socialism, and physical, material, and racial equality. Ideas of natural equality were 'pernicious' doctrines which would 'deteriorate the great races and destroy all the genius of the world'.[53] Social equality would destroy classes. Materialism was a 'disturbing spirit … rising like a moaning wind in Europe', striking at the 'principle of

[48] *H*, CXXIII, 1666, 16 Dec. 1852.
[49] *Speeches*, II, pp. 453–6, 30 Aug. 1848.
[50] *Vindication*, p. 193.
[51] *Sybil*, bk I, ch. 3.
[52] In 1880 he attacked the 'new foreign political organisation' of the Liberal party, i.e. the caucus. Buckle, *Disraeli*, VI, p. 576.
[53] *Bentinck*, p. 496.

patriotism' and the 'individuality of man'. It sapped a race's physical and moral vigour.[54]

The 1840s brought home the threat from these ideas and revealed the need for a heroic response to them. For Disraeli, there were four types of political challenge. First, especially after 1848, was continental and domestic radicalism, vigorously agitating for liberal nationalism and 'American' representative principles. Disraeli revealingly personalized the revolutionary forces of the continent into 'secret societies', so that they became groups against which he could pit his wits.[55] Second was Liberal ideological unsoundness at home, manifested in doctrinaire laissez-faire, the commercial materialism of the 'Manchester school', and wrong-headed approaches to imperial and foreign policy. Third was exclusiveness and faction on the tory side: hot-headed Protestants, faddist high churchmen, and blinkered and philistine aristocrats. The third problem contributed to the fourth, the difficulty for a minority Conservative party in making combinations in parliament which would restore its majority status and uphold conservative ideals, when most potential allies were misguided in some way or other; this required great tactical sleight-of-hand. The rest of this article traces Disraeli's strategy for addressing these problems after 1846, in opposition and eventually in power. It starts with the four major areas of domestic policy where insightful leadership was most necessary in order to heal the fractures of the 1840s: parliamentary reform, finance, the church, and Ireland. It then looks at the imperial and European tensions of the 1840s, and how Disraeli's policy thereafter was influenced by them. It concludes with some reflections on social reform. The urgency of each issue varied over time; Disraeli acted only when action seemed possible, necessary, and invigorating. But, in one way or another, he spent his career engaged in a gallant struggle to preserve England from the false ideas that he had exposed in his first decade in parliament.

III

Parliamentary reform is the domestic issue with which Disraeli is most associated in history, and with which he had most success. Yet this is ironic because it was the one with which he was most intermittently and reluctantly involved in life. This was partly because of the tactical difficulties connected with it, but also because – as he said in 1867 – strictly it was not a party question.[56] Parties need not adopt diametrically opposing attitudes to it; no profound principles need be involved in it. Unfortunately, in the past, both parties had been wrong-headed about it. Disraeli criticized the Venetian

[54] *Address at Glasgow*, pp. 12–16, where Disraeli also distinguished these evil forms of equality from *civil* equality – which was 'the only foundation of a perfect commonwealth'.

[55] He did this not only in novels, e.g. *Lothair*, but also in parliament, earning the ridicule of opponents and some historians: e.g. *H*, CCXXXI, 213, CCLVIII, 1931, 31 July 1876, 1 Mar. 1881.

[56] *H*, CLXXXV, 215, 11 Feb. 1867.

borough-mongering of eighteenth-century whigs and applauded Pitt's commitment to the principle of parliamentary reform against that corruption. But in *Sybil* he also attacked Wellington for an exclusiveness so gross that in 1830 the aristocracy had overthrown him.[57] In the 1840s and 1850s, Disraeli combined an approval of the *idea* of Reform in 1832 with a criticism of the whig Reformers' unhistorical use of property value alone to define the new borough franchise. The resulting lack of variety in the franchise raised the danger of a popular loss of confidence in the Commons and a new agitation. However, it hardly needed saying that Conservatives should not encourage that agitation.[58]

The problem was that the ideological ferment of 1848 reopened the question in ways that threatened the Englishness of the constitution. Radicals sought to 'Americanize' it, attacking the existing system which, by representing interests, represented 'the vast variety of the English character'. Such a plan would diminish the number of MPs defending traditionary influences and therefore 'the realised experience of a nation'. It would reduce the Commons's ability to check a centralizing executive.[59] And it would profoundly damage conservatism and the Conservative party.

So this radical campaign for a large-scale redistribution of seats must be combated. Moreover, once the question had come alive in parliament, the Conservatives could not afford merely to resist all proposals, or they would suffer great political damage by being seen as exclusive, as in the crisis of 1830–2. They would also lose the chance to shape a Reform bill so as to entrench the representation of 'traditionary influences'. The best way of doing that was to exclude as many (largely Liberal) urban voters from the county seats as possible, and the Conservatives attempted this in both their bills, in 1859 and 1867. In 1859, at Disraeli's suggestion, they also *broadened* the 1832 borough suffrage by the so-called 'fancy franchises', which aimed to increase electoral variety by the addition of specific interest groups (university graduates, savings bank account holders, certificated schoolmasters, and so on).[60] Since their 1859 bill was defeated because it did not *lower* the borough franchise, it was both logical and necessary to lower it in 1867. The adoption of household suffrage (with personal payment of rates) was the only effectively inclusive way of doing this; it settled the question and checked agitation for a generation. Even in the radicalized form in which the 1867 Act passed the Commons (owing to Liberal amendments which, for example, abolished the fancy franchises), it attained the Conservatives' major goals.

Of course, Disraeli thrived on the opportunities for manoeuvre thrown up in the 1867 session. He piloted the Reform Bill through the Commons by splitting the Liberals; he marginalized and humiliated Gladstone. But it would be wrong to assume that he regarded minority government as desirable; it weakened the executive's ability to govern on party principle and thus resist

[57] *Sybil*, bk I, ch. 3, bk IV, ch. 3.
[58] *H*, XCIX, 952, 20 June 1848.
[59] Buckle, *Disraeli*, III, p. 500; *H*, XCIX, 956, CLII, 979–81, 20 June 1848, 28 Feb. 1859.
[60] See *H*, CLII, 985–7, 28 Feb. 1859.

popular and ignorant pressure. His speech of August 1848 had described these evils graphically – and the description fitted the confusion of 1867 all too well.[61] For the Conservatives to form a minority government in 1866 was a necessary evil for the party's sake; the alternative was to accept subordinate place in a coalition headed by whig grandees, which might well have swallowed the Conservatives for good.[62] One beneficial consequence of the 1867 Reform Act was the polarization of national opinion as radicals agitated for a range of legislative reforms and their opponents sought refuge in the status quo, strengthening the Conservatives' following and identity. We cannot be certain that Disraeli anticipated this outcome – though the history of the 1830s made it a good bet. But both in dampening radical suffrage agitation and in facilitating a clearer ideological division between the parties, the 1867 act helped to correct the destructive consequences of the 1840s.

On finance, the major scope for a heroic approach came in the 1840s and 1850s, in the hope of resolving the class tensions that had arisen over the corn laws. In the 1840s, Disraeli's fertile brain devised a reading of history which established a fiscal creed for toryism that was neither sectional nor theoretical. He claimed that eighteenth-century whigs had raised indirect taxes too high, in order to fight unnecessary wars. Against their opposition, Pitt had developed a practical policy of political economy, including reciprocal reductions in duties effected by commercial treaties.[63] For Disraeli, protection was not a class issue about the detail of the corn tariff.[64] It was, practised flexibly and in moderation, a historic imperial, foreign, and constitutional policy, balancing the defence of important interests with low taxes. It safeguarded the 'English spirit' and the 'aristocratic principle' ('to aspire and to excel') by allowing the English merchant, farmer, manufacturer, and sailor to be the best in the world. It was swept away in the 1840s by ignorant theorists, in thrall to class envy and intent on a 'great experiment', but understanding neither the historical genius of England nor the 'practical' character of her people.[65]

But depression and agitation had facilitated this unfortunate revolution, and the resulting social bitterness made it all the more urgent to reach a conciliatory fiscal settlement, establishing broad and fair principles for direct and indirect taxation throughout the nation. The aim, as Disraeli said in 1851, was to 'terminate the unhappy quarrel between town and country'.[66] But it was also to compensate the interests that had benefited from protection, and in particular to check the damage being done to the unity of the landed interest by the growing tension between landlords and farmers.[67] As Peter Ghosh

[61] *Speeches*, II, pp. 453–5, 30 Aug. 1848. See also his criticism of parliament's damaging pressure on the weak governments of 1829–30 and 1834–5 to reduce estimates too far 'to please the public' (*H*, CII, 110–11, 1 Feb. 1849), and his speech of 20 Mar. 1873 refusing to take office in a minority (*Speeches*, II, p. 547).

[62] R. Blake, *Disraeli* (London, 1966), pp. 444–7.

[63] *H*, LXIII, 390, 10 May 1842.

[64] *H*, LXVI, 627–8, 14 Feb. 1843.

[65] *H*, CIV, 691, CVI, 1169–71, 23 Apr. 1849, 2 July 1849. The definition of the 'aristocratic principle' is from *Bentinck*, p. 557.

[66] *Speeches*, I, p. 323, 11 Feb. 1851.

[67] Disraeli to Manners, 15 Oct. 1849, *Disraeli letters*, V, p. 230.

demonstrates conclusively, Disraeli, inexperienced in financial matters, was feeling his way towards this difficult goal in opposition in the late 1840s, and hoped that his budgets of 1852 and 1859 would achieve it. On both occasions his hopes were frustrated by his party's inability to get support in the Commons, but also by costly defence scares, which prevented him from lowering income tax as far as he wanted. So Gladstone was left to play the major role in the mid-Victorian fiscal settlement, in his budgets of 1853 and 1860.[68] Thereafter, there was much less class tension on tax matters, and therefore less scope for heroic healing measures.[69] Though not as zealously as Gladstone, Disraeli continued to advocate low taxes and moderation in defence spending, even in 1878–80, grasping that one merit of a virile foreign policy was to beat off restless clamour for extra naval expenditure.[70]

IV

Finance offered uncongenial detail. There was more ideological excitement to be gained by fighting for the defence of organized religion against its enemies. Little evidence exists of Disraeli's own religious faith, but he genuinely believed that a society without it was in a state of decadence.[71] In 1849 he claimed that the church was 'the most efficient means' of attaining his goal of the 'renovation of the national spirit'.[72] But the behaviour of its current leaders was frustrating his hope of reconstituting it on a national basis. In his novels, he condemned the small-mindedness and complacency of the bishops. His greatest irritation was reserved for the ecclesiastical factions, which damaged the church's power and popular attractiveness by squabbling among themselves about doctrine and ritual. In 1870 he blamed the church's failure since the 1840s on 'monks and schoolmen' of the Newman-Manning school who had sought refuge in 'mediaeval superstitions' rather than standing on the rock of Semitic truth.[73] He had no time for unhistorical high church ritualists, whose ceremonial symbolized doctrines that the Church of England had been established in order to repudiate.[74]

In the 1860s, for the first time since the late 1830s, events interacted to make a church defence campaign politically viable. Disraeli took an important part in it, calling for a strengthening of the church's national roots and relevance by increased lay involvement in the Establishment's affairs, counteracting clerical exclusiveness.[75] As in all domestic affairs, he expected more good to come from

[68] See Ghosh, 'Disraelian Conservatism'; H. C. G. Matthew, 'Disraeli, Gladstone, and the politics of mid-Victorian budgets', *Historical Journal*, 22 (1979), pp. 619–20.

[69] However, urban and rural ratepayers were vociferously demanding relief in the early 1870s, and the first budget of Disraeli's government, in 1874, delivered this.

[70] Ghosh, 'Disraelian Conservatism', p. 286.

[71] *Diaries of Derby*, p. 97, 19 Jan. 1872.

[72] *Coningsby*, preface to 5th edn (1849).

[73] 'General preface', *Lothair*, p. xv.

[74] Buckle, *Disraeli*, v, p. 25; 5 Oct. 1874, *The letters of Disraeli to Lady Bradford and Lady Chesterfield*, ed. marquis of Zetland (2 vols., London, 1929), i, p. 156.

[75] Warren, 'Disraeli and the national church' offers the best account of these activities.

a change in spirit than from legislation, so it would be wrong to think of the Public Worship Regulation Act, passed in the first session of his 1874 government, as a major objective of his. Indeed it was wished on him by the queen and the archbishop of Canterbury. But it would be equally wrong to think that his imagination was not touched by the idea of being associated with such a stirring defence of church interests, checking ritualist excesses. The issue became very congenial to him, once he had succeeded in disciplining the clerical factions within his own cabinet; he thought that the church would 'be immensely strengthened' by it.[76] The act achieved the dual objective of resolving an awkward issue (though less successfully, in retrospect, than he hoped) and damaging Gladstone, who subsequently retired as Liberal leader. His government continued to tinker with religious issues, less than some of his clerical backbenchers wanted, but more than was tactically wise, given the potential of education and burials policy to reunite the Liberals.[77]

What fascinated him most about the church issue in the 1860s and 1870s was the opportunity that it offered for involvement in wider ideological combat. Ranged against the 'Semitic truths' on which Christianity was founded were German scholars on the one hand and, on the other, the new school of scientific materialists, whose work was applauded by destructive influences who would like England to surrender to sensual pagan 'luxury and self-indulgence'.[78] The church was divided and confused by these challenges, which needed to be met if it was to play its proper national role. Accordingly, Disraeli memorably confronted these wrong-headed ideas in speeches such as that at Oxford in 1864. 'Is man an ape or an angel? My Lord, I am on the side of the angels.'[79] Also resisting the attack on religion was the greatest spiritual force in Europe, Catholicism, led by the pope, 'an old man on a Semitic throne'.[80] In his most important novel, *Lothair* (1870), Disraeli presented modern Europe as engaged in a 'death struggle' between the contending ideals of the papacy and secular humanism. Both were in some ways noble; indeed they were derived from the Semite and Aryan divisions of 'the great race'. Each of these celebrated 'one portion of the double nature of humanity' (the spiritual nature of man, and human beauty); the fusion of Hebrew and Hellenic influences in the modern world had 'secured the civilisation of man'.[81] But the papacy and the secular humanists had also badly perverted divine ideals. Moreover, such was the strength of the secular radical mindset that, if the temporal power of the pope was abolished, the edifice of 'monarchies and law and civil order' throughout

[76] Disraeli to Lady Bradford, 5 June 1874, Buckle, *Disraeli*, v, p. 322. In his own parish in September 1874 he made a Protestant speech in protest at the 'stoled priests' who sought to dominate the service of reconsecration of Hughenden Church: S. Bradford, *Disraeli* (London, 1982), pp. 325–6.

[77] Vincent, *Disraeli*, p. 51.

[78] 'General Preface', *Lothair*, pp. xv–xvii; *Lothair*, ch. 17.

[79] Buckle, *Disraeli*, iv, p. 374.

[80] *Bentinck*, p. 509.

[81] *Lothair*, ch. 77. Though this may superficially appear an exotic confection, it was, in part, a contribution to the debate launched by Matthew Arnold's *Culture and anarchy* (1869).

Europe might well fall in five years.[82] The attraction of revolutionary nationalism was so strong that even Irish and English Catholics had been seduced by it in applauding Gladstone's proposal of 1868 to disestablish the Irish Church. Disraeli claimed that Irish Church disestablishment led directly to the fall of Rome in 1870.[83]

Disraeli – whose first premiership had been swiftly terminated as a result of this manoeuvre of Gladstone's – responded by unveiling his insight that it was England's function to assert her historic Anglicanism in order to provide a constructive synthesis of these warring ideals and thus help to maintain European civilization. The great purpose of Anglicanism was to marry up the spiritual and humanist traditions of European civilization, the Hebrew and the Hellenic.[84] The fall of Rome, and the Paris Commune, made it all the more vital for England to defend her established religion and to assert her values in Europe. This stance not only appealed to Disraeli's taste for historical philosophizing, but was also tactically valuable, since Gladstone's government of 1868–74 was widely believed to be too friendly to sacerdotalism and radical freethought and too timid in foreign affairs. In a speech at Glasgow in 1873, Disraeli argued that England must commit herself to maintain 'faith and freedom'; her 'proud destiny [might be] to guard civilization alike from the withering blast of atheism and from the simoom of sacerdotal usurpation'.[85] In his election address of 1874, he claimed that 'the cause of civil liberty and religious freedom [in Europe] mainly depends upon the strength and stability of England'.[86] In supporting the Public Worship Regulation Bill he reiterated his call for England to 'rally on the broad platform of the Reformation' against the challenges brewing on the continent – and hence to 'put down Ritualism', that challenge to the historic principles of Anglicanism.[87]

Thus Disraeli's Anglican initiative was bound up with two other issues, foreign policy and Ireland. It stimulated his anxiety for England to assert herself in Europe in the ways discussed in the next section. In the long run, this was more fertile territory for him than Ireland, which he always found an intractable problem. For much of his career, the Irish Catholics held an influential balancing position in parliament, and were thus tactically desirable allies. But Disraeli, conscious of his identity as an English patriot, remained vehemently opposed to Irish radical opinions on religious, land, and constitutional reform, whether articulated by O'Connell in the 1830s, the Fenians in the 1860s, or the Home Rulers after 1870. Indeed, hostility to O'Connell and Irish Church appropriation helps to explain his move away from radicalism

[82] As two Catholic characters predicted in *Lothair*, chs. 50, 84.

[83] *Speeches*, II, pp. 389–90, 11 Mar. 1873.

[84] This is not to say that Disraeli believed that the current Anglican establishment had the vision to bring this about. *Lothair* surely projects a strong undercurrent of doubt about the capacity of the leaders of the day in church, state, or society to fulfil their historic function.

[85] *Address at Glasgow*, p. 69.

[86] Buckle, *Disraeli*, V, p. 275.

[87] *H*, CCXXI, 78–80, 15 July 1874.

into the tory party in the 1830s, just as it did that of his early hero Sir Francis Burdett, for whom he canvassed at the Westminster election of 1837.[88]

None the less, Disraeli sensed that an accommodation between English tories and Irish Catholics was possible in defence of similar spiritual, hierarchical, and rural values.[89] In the 1830s and 1840s he had strongly criticized the puritanical and uncomprehending traditional approach to Irish government, based on the penal laws and on the rigid imposition of English institutions in inappropriate circumstances, and accused Peel of surrendering too much to it.[90] Thus his vote against Irish coercion in 1846, unseating Peel, was by no means merely opportunistic. He interpreted Peel's Maynooth policy as a 'Prussian' attempt to subordinate Catholic education to Downing Street discipline, part of a desperate and unwise attempt throughout the United Kingdom to maintain the links between church and state on an erastian basis after the disorientating collapse of the pre-1832 church–state system.[91] This allowed him to oppose it, and distinguish it from the proper tory policy of granting Catholics religious freedom and respect. The latter accorded with his belief that all great empires could survive only by tolerating the diverse religious and racial values of their constituent peoples; he argued the same for India (see below).[92] In 1844 he referred to the need for 'ecclesiastical equality' in Ireland, and in 1845 seemed willing to support disendowment of the Anglican Church there if the Protestants would accept it in preference to state control.[93] There was little sign of that. However, popular dissenting and tory Protestantism was also making an avowed policy of concurrent endowment impossible. By the 1850s, Disraeli was frequently struck by parliament's hostility to endowing Catholicism.[94] In short, the demise of the old tory church–state verities in the 1830s and 1840s had produced an impasse in Irish policy.

Thus one great attraction of Disraeli's strategy of the 1860s, the abstract defence of religion internationally against atheism and secular liberalism, was that it allowed him to find an Irish strategy. He could talk the language of denominational reconciliation and social stability, bid for the votes of Irish Catholic MPs, and yet not offend Conservatives. He upheld the temporal power of the pope and refused to meet Garibaldi on his triumphant visit to Britain in 1864, which was championed by the Liberals. A significant number

[88] For his quarrel with O'Connell, see Buckle, *Disraeli*, I, pp. 286–95.

[89] See e.g. *Disraeli, Derby and the Conservative party: journals and memoirs of Edward Henry, Lord Stanley, 1849–1869*, ed. J. Vincent (Hassocks, 1978), pp. 40–1, 16 Feb. 1851.

[90] E.g. *H*, LXXI, 434–5, LXXII, 1007–17, 9 Aug. 1843, 16 Feb. 1844.

[91] *Speeches*, I, pp. 84–8, 11 Apr. 1845. See also *Sybil*, bk IV, ch. 14. He had made a similar 'anti-Prussian' argument against the whigs' national education scheme for England of 1839: Buckle, *Disraeli*, II, p. 62.

[92] In 1863, advocating the right of Catholic prisoners to receive ministration in their own religion, he decried a narrowly Protestant policy in England or Ireland and claimed that any support for 'the religious principle' was in the interests of the Church of England: *H*, CLXX, 430, 20 Apr. 1863.

[93] *H*, LXXII, 1017, 16 Feb. 1844; *Speeches*, I, pp. 87–8, 11 Apr. 1845.

[94] Buckle, *Disraeli*, III, pp. 270–1, 400–1, 543–4.

of Irish MPs supported him in his censure motion on Palmerston's foreign policy of 1864, while their abstentions led to the defeat of the church rate abolition bills in the early 1860s. But Gladstone's manoeuvre of 1868 on the Irish Church wooed most Catholics away from him, and left him in an awkward position. In the 1840s, when the great threat was whig erastianism, he had been tempted by the idea of disendowing the Irish Church, but that policy was incompatible with his institutional defence of religion against infidelity. Equally, though, he saw that there was no advantage in identifying himself with concurrent endowment, and did not do so. However, his Irish secretary, Mayo, was known to be sympathetic to the idea, and the resulting ambiguity in the Disraeli government's position was ruthlessly exploited by Gladstone and the Liberals at the 1868 election.[95] But Disraeli took his revenge over Gladstone's Irish University Bill in 1873. He claimed that from Pitt to Palmerston governments of both parties had in practice accepted a degree of concurrent endowment in order to maintain religious peace and strength in Ireland, but that Gladstone, in order to become prime minister, had exploited the anti-Protestantism of the Catholic Cardinal Cullen to 'kill' that policy. Between them, they had made Ireland a 'spiritual desert', and it was now 'humbug' for the Catholics to demand special treatment for themselves.[96]

The defection of the Catholics in 1868 left Disraeli only one heroic conservative role to play in Irish affairs – the thwarter of revolution. He took great pride in his part in frustrating the Fenian conspiracy of 1867–8. The rise of the Home Rule party in the early 1870s convinced him that the Irish Catholic MPs had sold out to the forces of national disintegration, and he resisted their arguments forcefully in 1874.[97] Henceforth he showed very little interest in concessionary Irish legislation, to the irritation of his Dublin administration.[98] He fought the 1880 election on the principle of opposing the Home Rule movement.[99] He won little political advantage from it.

V

Disraeli's failure over Ireland made it clearer that he must look to foreign affairs for a stirring battle for conservative values. He found external problems particularly congenial because they allowed him to reflect on the part that could be played by a great leader of philosophical insights into world developments. Ever since his early travels, he had an unshakeable belief that he understood the realities of foreign affairs better than insular middle-class politicians. The need was for a policy that would reassert England's historic identity as a global force, saving her power and simultaneously dealing a

[95] J. P. Parry, *Democracy and religion: Gladstone and the Liberal party, 1867–1875* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 267–9, 272; Warren, 'Disraeli and Ireland', pp. 63–4.

[96] *Speeches*, II, pp. 387–9, 11 Mar. 1873; Buckle, *Disraeli*, V, p. 203.

[97] *H*, CCXX, 951–63, 2 July 1874.

[98] Warren, 'Disraeli and Ireland', p. 165.

[99] See his public letter to the duke of Marlborough, 8 Mar. 1880, Buckle, *Disraeli*, V, pp. 514–16.

damaging blow to revolutionary ideas. Historically, England's power-base had been both imperial and European, and thus it should remain.

However, England's ability to uphold her empire and to exert influence in Europe had been badly damaged by her unilateral and doctrinaire lurch towards free trade in the 1840s. Disraeli's defence of the old tariff system in the early 1840s had focused particularly on the benefits that it had historically brought to English power abroad. Pitt had balanced the needs of imperial and European trade, binding the empire together by a policy of imperial preference, while making bilateral commercial treaties on the continent. These ensured that British markets were not flooded by unwelcome imports. But they also locked her into the continental diplomatic network and were a valuable engine of international peace; they underpinned the traditional tory policy of low defence estimates.[100] Disraeli's early attacks on Palmerston and Peel (1842–3) centred on the 'political inability and diplomatic neglect' that had prevented the signing of a new French treaty in 1840 and 1842.[101] When Pitt's system finally collapsed in the 1840s, England faced a future of diminishing links with her colonies, and of a precarious isolation at home. Thus Disraeli considered that free trade would not bring about a Cobdenite era of peace and plenty but, by generating defence panics, would increase expenditure and make it more difficult to keep taxes low. He worked towards a French treaty during the brief government of 1852.[102] It was ironic that the war scares of 1852 and 1858–9 prevented Disraeli from going down in history as a reforming chancellor. So what was to be done?

First, the empire. A great deal of confusion about Disraeli's policy to empire has been generated by historians who have sought to explain it by reference to the disputes of the 1880s and 1890s about imperial expansion and higher defence expenditure. Disraeli was not engaged in those disputes but in the debates of the 1840s, which considered how best to preserve the connections between metropolis and colonies. Disraeli's position was that intelligent, active, accountable but undoctrinaire approaches to colonial government were necessary in order to retain the imperial link while keeping English expenditure at sustainably low levels. Already in 1838, he blamed the Canadian rebellion on the whigs' lack of initiative and care; there and elsewhere, 'authority has dwindled into a mere matter of administration'.[103] Insofar as they had a policy, it was influenced too much by colonial reform ideologues with their theories of self-government. In 1849, he attacked the doctrinaire introduction of self-government into the Canadian territories as well as the repeal of the navigation acts and the dismantling of the preference system. In response to these unfortunate developments, he made a series of proposals to regularize links with the white colonies, including a customs union and the representation of

[100] *H*, lxvi, 615–28, cii, 109, 14 Feb. 1843, 1 Feb. 1849.

[101] *H*, lxvi, 620, 14 Feb. 1843.

[102] On 'peace and plenty', see *H*, xcvii, 436, 10 Mar. 1848; for 1852, Buckle, *Disraeli*, iii, pp. 395–7.

[103] *Whigs and whiggism*, pp. 426–7.

colonial assemblies by thirty MPs in the Westminster parliament.[104] In his Crystal Palace speech of 1872, sometimes regarded as the inauguration of a new colonial idea, he merely berated once more the Liberals' failure in the 1830s and 1840s to adopt those ideas and thus safeguard the colonial relationship. In the 1850s and early 1860s, his main grievance was that, while England had lost influence in the colonies, she still faced a large bill for their defence, because of the failure to agree a code for colonial defence. Hence his outburst of 1866, as chancellor ('what is the use of these colonial deadweights which *we do not govern*?'), which has often been misinterpreted as showing an opportunistic inconsistency about empire.[105]

Disraeli defended the tie with Canada on a number of occasions in the 1860s.[106] But the lack of a major threat to the colonies after the 1840s meant that the topic rarely offered the chance of participation in a great ideological struggle, and therefore hardly engaged his attention.[107] He used the rhetoric of 'empire' a great deal, but in the sense of the global might of England, which Gladstone's foreign policy was threatening. An over-active colonial policy might similarly weaken, rather than strengthen, English prestige. Thus it was fitting that, as prime minister after 1874, he took no interest in his own Colonial Office's South African federation schemes until, in early 1879, he was furious at the damaging defeat of the British forces there by the Zulus because it would 'reduce our Continental influence, and embarrass our finances'.[108]

Disraeli was much more concerned with India, partly because England indubitably did govern it, and partly because of an engrossing series of challenges to its good government. He regarded India as essential to English global prestige, and it misreads his mind to suggest that, in his opportunism, he might well not 'have opposed self-government for India'.[109] In 1853, he complained that, as traditionary influences in the Commons were waning, and it was turning into 'a meeting of delegates', it was less inclined to take proper care of the government of India.[110] This gave more power to arrogant, insensitive bureaucracy. His major concern was to counter that power with something more intelligent and vigorous.

Domineering bureaucracy had two drawbacks. The first was that it was insufficiently concerned with accountability and with good, cheap, economical rule. Thus in 1853 he opposed the renewal of the East India Company's charter, and called for firmer government, with clearer lines of responsibility

[104] Disraeli to Stanley, 28 Dec. 1849, and to Derby, 9, 18 Dec. 1851, Buckle, *Disraeli*, III, pp. 235–7, 333–5. There is now a good general overview of Disraeli's attitudes to empire: C. C. Eldridge, *Disraeli and the rise of a new imperialism* (Cardiff, 1996).

[105] Disraeli to Derby, 30 Sept. 1866, Buckle, *Disraeli*, IV, p. 476. The most recent misinterpretation is in Machin, *Disraeli*, p. 6. S. R. Stembridge, 'Disraeli and the millstones', *Journal of British Studies*, 5 (1965), pp. 122–39, was the first to put the record straight.

[106] Stembridge, 'Millstones', pp. 130–1.

[107] His occasional allegations of Liberal weakness on imperial issues did not stick: ibid., p. 133.

[108] Disraeli to the queen, 11 Feb. 1879, Buckle, *Disraeli*, VI, p. 424.

[109] Machin, *Disraeli*, p. 169.

[110] *H*, CXXVIII, 1042, 30 June 1853.

and more commitment to justice, education, and good finance.[111] This allied him with radical India reformers – and upset quite a few Conservatives who maintained the traditional policy of defending the Company.[112] The second drawback of unaccountable bureaucracy was when it became infected with moralistic whig Westernization. Disraeli believed that this was in the ascendant after 1848, under Dalhousie – contrary to the traditional policy of governing a multi-racial empire, which was to respect the traditions, property, and above all religions of all its elements. Disraeli blamed the Indian Mutiny of 1857 on this new-fangled English intolerance of Hindu and Moslem religious customs, ignorance of traditional laws, and contempt for property rights, which had rallied the different races and religions against imperial rule. The response to the mutiny was similarly chauvinistic, narrow-minded, vindictive, and racist, seeking to meet 'atrocities by atrocities'.[113] It would imperil the empire.

In 1857–8, Disraeli argued that India required firm but inspiring government. He suggested three solutions. One was a thorough overhaul of Indian finance, to maximize the revenue. The second was a structure for Indian government that included some British popular involvement, rather than a purely nominated council that would not challenge the rule of the governor-general effectively. In 1858, therefore, he proposed that five of its members should be elected by voters in large British towns. Though this proposal was frustrated by the Conservatives' minority status in parliament, it was a clever tactic, displaying his credentials as a parliamentary reformer and bidding for radical support, while associating the whig alternative with the corrupt days of Fox's patronage-ridden India bill of 1783. The third was for the queen to have a greater symbolic role in India, as a comprehensible, god-like embodiment of English interest and authority pledging to respect Indian religions and customs. This would engage the Oriental imagination.[114] It was clearly a precursor of the proposal of 1876 to make Victoria empress of India.[115]

If the combination of the wrong-headed cosmopolitan ideas of the 1840s, and the stupid arrogance of recent English governing practice, left a damaging legacy for the empire, it did the same for England's power in Europe. Her traditional policy was clear enough: to use her naval power to warn the French against expansion into the Low Countries, Italy, or the Iberian peninsula, yet to work closely and harmoniously with the French to frustrate Russian

[111] Ibid., 1032–64.

[112] This was not a new, opportunist manoeuvre. Already in 1842 he had called for a closer superintendence of the Indian budget and an attack on extravagance: *H*, LXII, 1028, 22 Apr. 1842.

[113] *H*, CXLVII, 440–81, 27 July 1857; at Newport Pagnell, 30 Sept. 1857, Buckle, *Disraeli*, IV, p. 99.

[114] *H*, CXLVII, 479, 27 July 1857.

[115] The proposal of 1876 originated with the queen. Disraeli admitted to Salisbury the advantage of making it appear 'deep and organised policy' in order, partly, to disguise that fact: 11 Jan. 1876, Buckle, *Disraeli*, V, p. 458. But this does not mean that it was imposed by the queen; Disraeli often resisted her views. The fact that in 1875–6 there was no urgent crisis in India explains why the idea was hers rather than his. But there is no reason to think that he did not welcome it in principle; he justified it on the same grounds as in 1857, that it would 'touch and satisfy the imagination': ibid., p. 465.

expansion in Eastern Europe, the Near East, and the Mediterranean. The French entente against 'the Russian system' was a staple of English strategy.[116] It allowed peace and low taxes. Eighteenth-century whigs had damaged national finances with their French conflicts, while the length and cost of the Napoleonic wars had dealt a fatal blow to the popularity of Pittism.

The problem was that the traditional policy had been endangered by the ideological developments of the 1840s, abroad and at home. Observing the European revolutions of 1848–9, Disraeli saw European civilization in decay. The continental powers were declining from feudal into American federal principles.[117] The forces of revolution were strong enough to destroy traditional governments, but not strong enough to govern in their place, in view of the continuing strength of hierarchical values and institutions. The resulting instability would ensure rule by vast standing armies. This militarism would increase the influence of Russia.[118]

It was England's duty to prevent these immensely destabilizing developments. She could do so only by an active policy of co-operation with the traditionally conservative European powers, France and Austria, against the twin evils of Russian militarism and continental liberalism. But the chances of this were threatened by the dominance at home of mistaken analyses of European politics. One was Palmerston's support for liberal agitation in Italy and elsewhere; in 1849, Disraeli alleged that, under his influence, the government had leagued with 'the discontented party in every state', assisted revolution, damaged England's commerce, and lowered her influence in Europe.[119] The other was the emergence of the Cobdenite idea that Britain should withdraw from European diplomacy and trust to laissez-faire. 'Once destroy the English aristocracy, and enthrone the commercial principle as omnipotent in this island, and [nothing] will prevent the Slavonians conquering the whole of the South of Europe'.[120] Therefore, cosmopolitan principles of two sorts were damaging the pursuit of national ideals and promoting the triumph of destructive ideas in Europe.

In the 1850s and 1860s, Disraeli's foreign policy sometimes appeared superficially contradictory, since on occasion he operated with Palmerston against the radicals and on others with the Cobdenites against the government. Of course tactics entered into this. But in fact Disraeli showed some scruple in not opposing foreign policy for the sake of opposition. His position was more or less consistent, depending on whether intervention or isolation seemed the greatest evil at any one time. He supported Palmerston in taking a tough line against Russia in 1853, but tentatively opposed an ideologically inspired

[116] Memorandum to Louis Philippe, 1842, ibid., II, p. 411.

[117] He suggested this in *Contarini Fleming* (1832), pt VII, ch. 2, and worked it out in the *Revolutionary Epick* (1834); for his views in 1848, see Buckle, *Disraeli*, III, pp. 166, 178.

[118] *Bentinck*, pp. 554–5. In 1873, Disraeli raised the spectre of the return of 'old serfdom' through conquest by a more vigorous race: *Address at Glasgow*, p. 16.

[119] *H*, CVI, 1165–8, 2 July 1849.

[120] Disraeli to Lady Londonderry, Buckle, *Disraeli*, III, p. 195.

extension to the Crimean War, for liberal principles, in 1855–6.[121] He upheld the French entente, criticising the Aberdeen government for its Francophobia in 1853 and Palmerston for trying to keep Napoleon III in an unnatural state of subordination to English interests after 1856. ('He is an Emperor, and he must have an empire …')[122] Between 1860 and 1870 Disraeli sometimes worried that Napoleon was being driven to associate with those who sought to redraw the European map, but felt that much of the blame for that lay with the English government for mismanaging him. Had Palmerston not alienated France and Russia, then England would still have had the influence necessary to prevent the Danish war of 1864.[123]

After Palmerston's death, Disraeli saw quickly that 'Gladstonism' was too non-interventionist a policy.[124] In reaction to it when in office after 1874, his European strategy had four self-consciously heroic objectives: to assert England's diplomatic influence on the continent; to do so by 'keep[ing] the democrats of Europe in check' after the political turbulence of 1870–1; to assist in defeating the Russian militarist alternative; and to educate domestic opinion out of what he considered to be a damaging isolationism.[125] It is important to see this as a quadruple strategy, rather than an expedient policy consistent only in its search for prestige.[126] Disraeli certainly did want to be noticed in Europe, and to strut on the diplomatic stage. But he also needed to see himself defending the continental status quo from attack by Russia and revolution. The enfeeblement of France in 1870–1 meant that Germany, Austria and Russia had to band together to try to settle European questions among themselves. This was unacceptable in that it marginalized England, but also because, when the Balkan question arose in 1875, it raised the possibility that Russia (and Austria-Hungary) would be unable to resist popular pan-Slavism and would be forced into a revolutionary partition of the Ottoman Empire.[127] Germany would demand compensation in the West, placing France, Belgium, and England in a disastrously weak position.[128] Therefore, England must take a

[121] See e.g. ibid., IV, p. 25. It is possible to put a more sceptical construction on Disraeli's difficulties in finding a consensual patriotic policy for his party in 1855–6: see J. R. Vincent, 'The parliamentary dimension of the Crimean war', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser., 31 (1981), pp. 37–49.

[122] Buckle, *Disraeli*, IV, pp. 54–5, 216–26. The quotation (1858) is at p. 218.

[123] Ibid., IV, pp. 304, 323, V, p. 128; *H*, CLXXVI, 723–5, 4 July 1864.

[124] Disraeli to Stanley, 22 Apr. 1867, ibid., IV, p. 471.

[125] The quotation is reported in Lord R. Gower, *Records and reminiscences* (London, 1903), p. 350.

[126] Disraeli's 'sheer expediency' and 'nearly total … flexibility' during the Eastern crisis are laboured by R. W. Seton-Watson, *Disraeli, Gladstone and the Eastern question: a study in diplomacy and party politics* (New York, 1972 edn), p. 552, R. Millman, *Britain and the Eastern question, 1875–1878* (Oxford, 1979), pp. 168, 454, and Davis, *Disraeli*, pp. 200, 202. P. J. V. Rolo, 'Derby', in K. M. Wilson, ed., *British foreign secretaries and foreign policy: from Crimean War to First World War* (London, 1987), p. 107, writes of Disraeli's 'prestige-conditioned reaction' to the Berlin Memorandum of 1876.

[127] Disraeli saw Russia's attack on Turkey in 1877 as a war of 'extermination … against a religion & a race': *Diaries of Derby*, p. 442, 5 Oct. 1877.

[128] Disraeli to Salisbury, 29 Nov. 1876, Buckle, *Disraeli*, VI, p. 104.

stand, at first to try to achieve a localized, conservative settlement in the Balkans,[129] and then, when this failed and Russia declared war on Turkey in April 1877, to find a way of protecting English interests at Constantinople and in the Near East while trying to avoid war. This search dominated English foreign policy in 1877–8, and seized the imagination of the media. It also had its effect on Disraeli. At the beginning of the Eastern crisis he regarded the general European balance as the major problem, but he came to see the struggle with Russia as the heart of the matter. Moreover, it is arguable that the tone and indeed substance of his foreign policy between 1878 and 1880 was affected by his growing sense of Russia as a foe against which he could fight a stirring battle of wits (perhaps his last).

Disraeli's foreign policy was also influenced by domestic politics. But here it is important to see that the perils were more apparent than the benefits, especially given the divisions in public opinion exposed by the Bulgarian agitation of 1876–7 and the cabinet's difficulty in formulating an effective strategy throughout 1877. Even had the government been able to agree on a war policy in 1877, there is little evidence that it would have gained electorally from one, at least before December. As Salisbury wrote in October 1877, 'though the feeling against Russia is strong, it no where rises nearly to Income-tax point'.[130] Disraeli's first concern was to avoid humiliation in parliament. He constantly feared that, if Russia was not stopped from entering Constantinople, his government would be censured for betraying English interests; he would be remembered to posterity in the same breath as Lord Aberdeen.[131] In 1878, at the culmination of the crisis and after its fortuitous ending, there was a substantial amount of Conservative patriotic sentiment. But the government was almost certainly right not to call an election in the aftermath of the Berlin settlement. Not only would this have been a constitutional innovation and an insult to parliament; also, public opinion was still deeply divided and fickle on foreign affairs. More important still, the chief whip thought that the coming election would turn on taxation and the state of the economy, for which the government would be punished.[132]

[129] Millman's claim of Disraeli's expedient flexibility (fn 124) rests on his (short-lived) proposal of a quick settlement in the Balkans, involving some partition but brokered by England. But this was surely more conservative in spirit than a partition conditioned by pan-Slavism and war. It is true that Disraeli was flexible about the broader question of the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire, but that was because he never regarded it as a major (or very traditional) objective of British foreign policy.

[130] M. Swartz, *The politics of British foreign policy in the age of Disraeli and Gladstone* (Basingstoke, 1985), p. 67.

[131] *Diaries of Derby*, pp. 402, 418, 464, 23 May, 12 July, 17 Dec. 1877. Disraeli's claim in 1878 to have achieved 'peace with honour' was a reference to Russell's famous veiled criticism of Aberdeen in Sept. 1853: 'if peace cannot be maintained with honour, it is no longer peace': S. Walpole, *The life of Lord John Russell* (2 vols., London, 1889), II, p. 190.

[132] Swartz, *Politics of foreign policy*, p. 101; H. J. Hanham, *Elections and party management: politics in the time of Disraeli and Gladstone* (Hassocks, 1978 edn), p. 228. H. Cunningham, 'Jingoism in 1877–78', *Victorian Studies*, 14 (1970–1), pp. 451–3, stresses the weakness and ephemeral nature of jingoism.

Disraeli saw his relationship to the electorate not as a populist but as an educator and inspiration. He sought to conquer its dominant and narrow commercial sympathies, to lead it away from the 'morbid spirit of domestic change and criticism',[133] and to tease out its latent historic spirit of enterprise. It is arguable that he had been engaged in this strategy since 1868. It is surely wrong to see his two speeches after the success of the Abyssinian expedition of 1867–8 as a bid for jingo support; rather, their criticism of commercial materialism suggests an attempt to alter public attitudes on foreign affairs.[134] The same can be said for his extra-parliamentary speeches in 1872 and 1873 and his 1874 election address, especially since the latter two were primarily concerned with using religion – that all-absorbing subject to Englishmen – to demonstrate the value of an active European policy. It is not surprising that, after the diplomatic triumph of 1878, his rhetoric stepped up a gear. His (still very occasional) speeches between 1878 and 1880 had a common theme – that the English people had a choice between accepting their global and imperial responsibilities, and embracing cosmopolitan principles and a complacent decline. His only intervention at the 1880 election warned voters that the 'power of England and the peace of Europe will largely depend on the verdict of the country'.[135] He must have been conscious of the elements of opinion that he could count on in this struggle, especially given the alarm at the growing power of Germany and Russia. He naturally hoped that such a self-consciously 'national' policy was capable of striking chords with many English voters. But he surely still believed, indeed the 1880 result showed, that financial questions dominated elections, that commercial (and, as he would see it, complacent and sentimental) opinions were still to the fore in Britain, and that many who held these opinions could be persuaded by the Liberals that it was 'Dizzi-Ben-Dizzi's' policy of 'prestige' and 'imperialism' that was un-English.[136]

VI

Where does the social legislation of 1874–80 fit into the approach taken so far to Disraeli's politics? In most respects, it was surely insignificant. Minor interventionism was neither a great historic policy nor even a party issue.[137]

[133] Disraeli to Derby, 25 Jan. 1871, Buckle, *Disraeli*, v, p. 132.

[134] In an age accused, 'perhaps not unjustly, of selfishness, and a too great regard for material interests', it was a legitimate cause of pride to have elevated not just the military, but also the 'moral … character of England throughout the world': *Speeches*, II, p. 132, 2 July 1868; *Times*, 18 June 1868, p. 9. Harcourt, 'Disraeli's imperialism', adopts the other view.

[135] Buckle, *Disraeli*, VI, p. 515.

[136] For Liberal propaganda of this sort, see A. S. Wohl, '"Dizzi-Ben-Dizzi": Disraeli as alien', *Journal of British Studies*, 34 (1995), pp. 375–411; R. Koebner and H. D. Schmidt, *Imperialism: the story and significance of a political word, 1840–1960* (Cambridge, 1964), pp. 135–65.

[137] In *H*, CXXVIII, 1033–6, 30 June 1853, Disraeli distinguished between three categories of issue: 'purely party' questions, concerning the distinctive principles of the opposing parties; difficult problems, on which the parties competed for the honour of settling them; and other, lesser matters. The idea of social reform as bipartisan is valuably stressed by P. Ghosh, 'Style and substance in

The bills of 1875 and 1876 could expect cross-party support. They reflected the now-standard concerns of the moralistic middle classes, who were seeking gestures to integrate the working man into the political system and ways to elevate his character and improve national efficiency, without challenging the foundations of the Victorian economy.[138] In that sense, social legislation emerged out of a parliamentary and civil service consensus. Disraeli's epic conception of politics as a clash of ideas left little room for legislative detail; as Derby wrote, he 'detests the class of business which he is apt to call parochial'.[139]

Having said that, emphasizing the social agenda did have some definite benefits for Disraeli. First, it appealed to his reactive notion that politics should relieve specific social tensions. He welcomed the labour laws legislation and the Agricultural Holdings Act of 1875 because they reduced the 'materials for social agitation'.[140] Second, the mild, constructive but generally permissive nature of the reforms made a useful contrast to two of the old false abstract 'cosmopolitan' theories that Disraeli had criticized in his youth, political economy and centralization.[141] He may have hoped to play the game of the 1830s and 1840s again, taking the credit for measures of limited intervention and painting the (or at least some) Liberals as doctrinaire advocates of a policy of class divisiveness. If so, this was in general an outdated strategy, though it may have had some success in constituencies where laissez-faire Liberalism remained strong. Equally, it is possible to see his strictures against centralization as a defence of the continuing social role of men of property, and a bid to capitalize on the dictatorial tendencies of the preceding Gladstone government and its 'socialist' allies. 'Permissive legislation is the character of a free

---

Disraelian social reform, c. 1860–1880', in P. J. Waller, ed., *Politics and social change in modern Britain: essays presented to A. F. Thompson* (Brighton, 1987), pp. 59–90.

[138] Hence Disraeli's remarks in 1874 that the temper of the time favoured the consideration of social questions: Buckle, *Disraeli*, v, pp. 311, 359.

[139] *Diaries of Derby*, p. 448, 25 Oct. 1877.

[140] On the former, see D. J. Mitchell, *Cross and tory democracy: a political biography of Richard Assheton Cross* (New York, 1991), p. 89, and Buckle, *Disraeli*, v, pp. 371–2. On the latter, see his remarks to the queen in Blake, *Disraeli*, pp. 557–8.

[141] This helps to make sense of ambiguous evidence about Disraeli's views on the importance of social reform. It did not feature as one of the 'deeper and higher' questions that he identified as emerging in 1873: the defence of the monarchy, aristocracy, Commons, church, corporations, landed interest, and other property: *Speeches*, II, p. 552, 20 Mar. 1873. On the other hand, in *Sybil*, Disraeli had argued that it was the duty of those in power to 'secure the social welfare of the PEOPLE': bk IV, ch. 14. But this was not a statement about the role of the state; rather, it was an encouragement to local property-owners to adopt a paternalist approach to their communities rather than surrender to materialism and political economy. It was partly in that context that Disraeli, on writing a new preface to his novels in 1870, listed the elevation of 'the physical as well as the moral condition of the people' as the sixth aim of a reconstructed tory party: 'General preface', *Lothair*, pp. x–xi. He also wanted to smear the Liberals as the political economy party: at the Crystal Palace in 1872 he associated the tories with the factory legislation of the 1840s, ignoring the cross-party nature of voting at the time: *Speeches*, II, pp. 531–2.

people.'[142] Finally, there was as ever a large tactical element in the social reform strategy. The uncontentious nature of the bills kept Conservative backbenchers profitably occupied in sober but harmless pursuits, while making it difficult for Liberals to unite in an effective campaign against the government.

VII

Any attempt to rationalize Disraeli's political motives must be provisional and tentative, given the complexity of his character and haziness of his language. But there is some merit in challenging the all-too-frequent reduction of those motives into simple short-term calculations of advantage. If we look at what Disraeli wrote and said, a sufficiently consistent front to the world emerges. He thought and spoke in generalities, but it is worth recovering and connecting those generalities, rather than dwelling at length on minor inconsistencies in his behaviour.

Several general themes emerge from the preceding pages. First, whereas the tendency is still to interpret Disraeli mainly in the light of domestic and foreign debates that reached maturity after his death, it is more productive to see him as concerned primarily with the intellectual challenges posed in his early career – especially the 1840s. Those challenges came from the weakness of traditional institutions in the face of liberal, radical, and revolutionary ideas at home and abroad; from the growth of a materialist commercial temperament; from the difficulty of mobilizing a Conservative response, given the selfishness of landed MPs, the factionalism in the church, and the breakdown of the two-party system; and from the threats to British power in Europe and the empire, especially from Russia. He developed conceptions of the dangers posed by these developments that profoundly shaped the direction of his later policies. His responses were necessarily affected *partly* by tactical considerations, which were mainly parliamentary. But to the extent that his initiatives were influenced by expectation of *electoral* approval they were frequently out of date: a number of his proposals of the 1860s and 1870s would have been more popular twenty years earlier.[143]

Secondly, his politics were innately defensive. He thought in terms of preventing decay, of defusing social tensions, of creating a unifying synthesis out of disturbance. He judged his political manoeuvres by their success in settling social conflicts. He was no enthusiast for most legislative proposals, since they were either divisive or humdrum. (However, in private cor-

[142] Buckle, *Disraeli*, v, p. 391.

[143] Russophobia was probably less dominant in the 1870s than in the 1850s. For his social policy, see above. His church patronage policy of 1868 seems to have assumed that popular Protestantism was as powerful as when he was struck by its intensity in the 1845–53 period. In predicting the likely instincts of Dissenters, he may well have assumed that conservative Wesleyanism was more influential than it was by the 1860s and 1870s. As Warren points out, his church reform strategy of 1861–5 foundered partly on the increasing unwillingness of many church defenders to put their faith in partisan political campaigns: 'Disraeli and the national church', pp. 113–14.

respondence he rather comically dramatized the measures passed by his government in an attempt to give them social significance.)[144]

Thirdly, the ultimate purpose of this defensive strategy was to uphold the historic values of England. He was preoccupied with his place in history as a national leader. He aimed to operate in tune with a strong (if sometimes contrived) understanding of English development, character, and purpose. He sought to realize that Englishness, to build it up, and to see off threats to it that would diminish the country in its great struggle with other races. His politics therefore took the form of a series of intellectual combats with false, cosmopolitan ideas that would damage the national character. These combats were to be undertaken by a combination of insight, intrigue, and inspirational leadership: by strategy, parliamentary tactics, and stirring argument. Disraeli's problem was that domestic politics in a commercial, sectarian country like England did not constitute fertile territory for such grand warfare. On neither financial nor ecclesiastical questions was he able to make the mark that he wished. Hence the attraction of international affairs.

Fourthly, his approach to politics was self-consciously heroic and elitist. He sought to present himself as the indispensable man in the fight for the soul of England. He could explain his prolonged failure to gain power by the unwillingness of blinkered but powerful upper- and middle-class opinion to recognize his genius and his diagnoses; this reinforced his self-perception as an outsider. (This is not to say that Disraeli believed that working-class opinion was any more likely to agree with him; he probably assumed that conventional opinion everywhere would tend to be muddle-headed.) It may also be that it became a psychological necessity for him to create threats to English values, or magnify their severity, in order to underline the uniqueness of his contribution to challenging them. In other words, his heroic conception of his political role became almost an end in itself, and explains much of his emphasis on the international crisis of faith around 1870, and the vigour of his Eastern and Indian policy after 1874. However, this last argument should not be pressed too far, because many others agreed that an important diplomatic initiative was needed between 1874 and 1880 to bring Britain back into the continental mainstream, and to help to uphold the European order.

Finally, to see Disraeli as engaged on a personal, if often quixotic, struggle to realize the national character is also useful because it permits a comparison with his great rival Gladstone. Both men's political approach was shaped, at least in part, by the dramatic events of the 1840s.

Of course their responses differed in many ways, for a variety of reasons. Assisted by his evangelical upbringing and university education, Gladstone's political and intellectual training and temperament were far removed from Disraeli's. He lacked Disraeli's sense of the ridiculous and his sociological grasp was less distinctive. Whereas Disraeli's heroic political style revolved largely

[144] See e.g. Disraeli to Lady Bradford, 10 Aug. 1875, 14 Aug. 1879, *Letters to Lady Bradford*, I, p. 273, II, p. 231.

around his consciousness of his intellectual superiority and indispensability, Gladstone's equally indomitable self-belief was yoked to a personal vocation to combat manifestations of sinfulness in general and, in the executive field, the evils of over-government and over-taxation. For this reason among others, some of the perspectives from which Gladstone viewed the crises of the 1840s were different from Disraeli's; he also had a more conventional belief in progress. They differed also in their conception of the role of the people. Gladstone sought to mobilize an active and involved public opinion in the purifying battle against sin. Disraeli regarded an imaginative appeal to 'popular sympathies' as a 'high primeval practice',[145] but considered that the preservation of dignity (and frequently a sphinx-like silence) was an essential aspect of this leadership. In 1880 he was contemptuous of Gladstone 'spouting all over the country, like an irresponsible demagogue', which was 'wholly inexcusable in a man who was a statesman'.[146] Perhaps the best example of Disraeli's attitude is his response to Turnerelli's proposed People's Tribute, with which we started. Despite all the publicity and expectation, there was no People's Tribute – because Disraeli would have nothing to do with it. The subscribed pennies notwithstanding, he coldly refused repeated requests to receive it, and it found a welcoming home at Madame Tussaud's (appropriately, at the entrance to the Napoleon Room). The saga generated satirical merriment for the likes of *Punch* for nearly a year. There was no great Conservative party rally at the Crystal Palace; the 52,800 patriotic working men had spent their money in vain – except to be laughed at by the pleasure-going classes of London.[147] Disraeli was not the cynical populist of opponents' and historians' legend. To have accepted the Tribute would have been personally demeaning, damaging the aura of mystery and intellectual gravitas that he worked so hard to project; it would have been un-English, unhistorical, and an insult to the head of state; and it would have played into the hands of those Liberals who were already accusing his Eastern and Indian policy of evoking the tawdry glitter of Napoleon III's France.[148]

But once all these qualifications have been made, it is still suggestive that Gladstone and Disraeli both came to political maturity as Conservatives in the 1830s and 1840s and were profoundly affected by the processes of disintegration that they witnessed then. They sought to uphold the church, religion, property, and the other institutional checks on an active, high-spending central government. They shared an opposition to whig moralism and erastianism, to radicalism, to the materialism of a commercial society, and to unimaginative imperial bureaucracy. Both were genuinely alarmed at the breakdown of the

[145] Moses and Mahomet had done it: *Tancred*, bk IV, ch. 3.

[146] Buckle, *Disraeli*, VI, p. 524.

[147] J. T. Tussaud, *The romance of Madame Tussaud's* (London, 1920), pp. 156–62; e.g. *Punch*, 76 (Jan.–June 1879), pp. 186–7, 227, 306, ibid., 77 (July–Dec. 1879), pp. 96, 237.

[148] His refusal can be contrasted with his acceptance of a golden casket and address, celebrating the same events, from British bankers and traders in California, who thanked him for maintaining the empire: *Times*, 12 Dec. 1878, p. 6, 20 Dec. 1878, p. 8.

two-party system, while privately conscious that after 1850 they were the two men most responsible for the Conservatives' failure to reunite. Even after the re-emergence of a clear two-party division in 1867, their immense egos continued to make them ambivalent about party. Unshakeably self-confident about their unique insight into the problems facing England, they regarded most other politicians, even on their own side, as incapable. Each created a heroic rationalization of his party's role that was unrealistic (in Disraeli's case, it was the idea of the Conservatives as national and aristocratic against the Liberals' cosmopolitan democracy, a division that would have radicalized British politics enormously had it been true). They sought to bend party to their ends.[149] In reality, most of the electoral strength of both parties came from loyalties and anxieties that were tangential to the leaders' concerns. The middle classes flocked to the Conservatives despite Disraeli's studied condescension towards their insularity and insecurity. Gladstone soldiered on into the age of the Newcastle Programme while convincing himself that he was the only true conservative in British politics. At the grassroots, British politics may often have lacked heroism, but Gladstone and Disraeli sought to infuse it by engaging in a dramatic struggle. Each publicized a succession of threats to the national organism and character; each was convinced that only he had the intellectual or spiritual insight to deal with them; both sought fame by tackling them. Once domestic tensions seemed to be under control, the major question for both became Britain's vocation and character in Ireland and the wider world. Here their differences emerged again: Gladstone analysed the situation with restless, strident moral fervour, Disraeli with detached irony; Gladstone sought to make England atone for past sins, Disraeli to make her wake up to the pettiness and absurdity of her dominant views before they lost her her global position. But each aimed to mobilize not just their parties, but the country, in a heroic crusade that would educate the people into the right sense of nationhood. How far the country responded is quite another matter.

[149] Though Disraeli was probably less dismissive of party pressures than Gladstone, it is none the less striking that the intensity with which he and Derby pursued parliamentary reform in 1859 and 1867 lost no fewer than five cabinet ministers, while in 1878 his foreign policy drove out of cabinet Derby's son, who had spent as long at the very centre of Conservative politics as Disraeli, with much higher rank.